Wonders of Worstedopolis

Discovering unique and distinctive collections at the University of Bradford

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Welcome to Bradford

I have the immense privilege of looking after the Special Collections at the University of Bradford. I have worked there since 2000; my previous jobs included cataloguing historic cookbooks at Manchester Metropolitan University and looking after Music Library at Nottingham University.

Our service at Bradford is small: our permanent staff comprises one full-time professional (me) and one part-time assistant, plus a shifting population of project staff, volunteers and trainees. We are a relatively new service. Our parent Library accepted many archive and rare book collections but was unable to employ professional staff to manage them. The result? Hidden collections, which were uncatalogued, unused and vulnerable. Fortunately, in 2000, external funding from the Research Libraries Support Project (RSLP) enabled the Library to employ special collections staff for the first time. As we brought the collections to light, the value of our work was recognised, and the temporary posts made permanent.

Meet the collections

Now to discover the collections! Special Collections holds over 100 named collections of archives, rare books, pamphlets, maps, photographs and ephemera. The collections cover about 1.5 linear kilometres, or 117 cubic metres. We have at least 25 GB of digitised and born-digital material.

What do we have and why do we have it? Our collections and collecting can be understood best in the context of the University's location and history.

Educating Worstedopolis

Bradford is located in England's biggest (and best!) county: Yorkshire. The Industrial Revolution transformed Bradford from a small rural settlement to a huge town centred on wool and other textile industries: from a population of just over 6,000 in 1801 to over 100,000 in 1851. So dominant were these trades that the city was often known as Worstedopolis: worsted (a kind of wool) plus "polis" for city.

New communities formed around the factories set up by entrepeneurs such as Sir Titus Salt, who made a fortune from processing alpaca and built the wonderful model village Saltaire. We see similar stories across Yorkshire, in Leeds, Wakefield, Dewsbury, Huddersfield, Halifax and other nearby towns. There are parallels across the Pennines in Manchester where Cotton rather than Wool was king.

Bradford's surrounding countryside is part of our story. The Yorkshire Dales are the city's back yard: green hills, stone walls, and sheep. The wool of those sheep started the story. Now the Dales are also our green lung, a place to cycle, walk and enjoy.

Bradford's industrial boom was quick, followed by a slow decline as other countries caught up with and then overtook our producers. Shocked by the poor reception of their goods at international fairs, some of the city's industrialists realised that they needed to improve

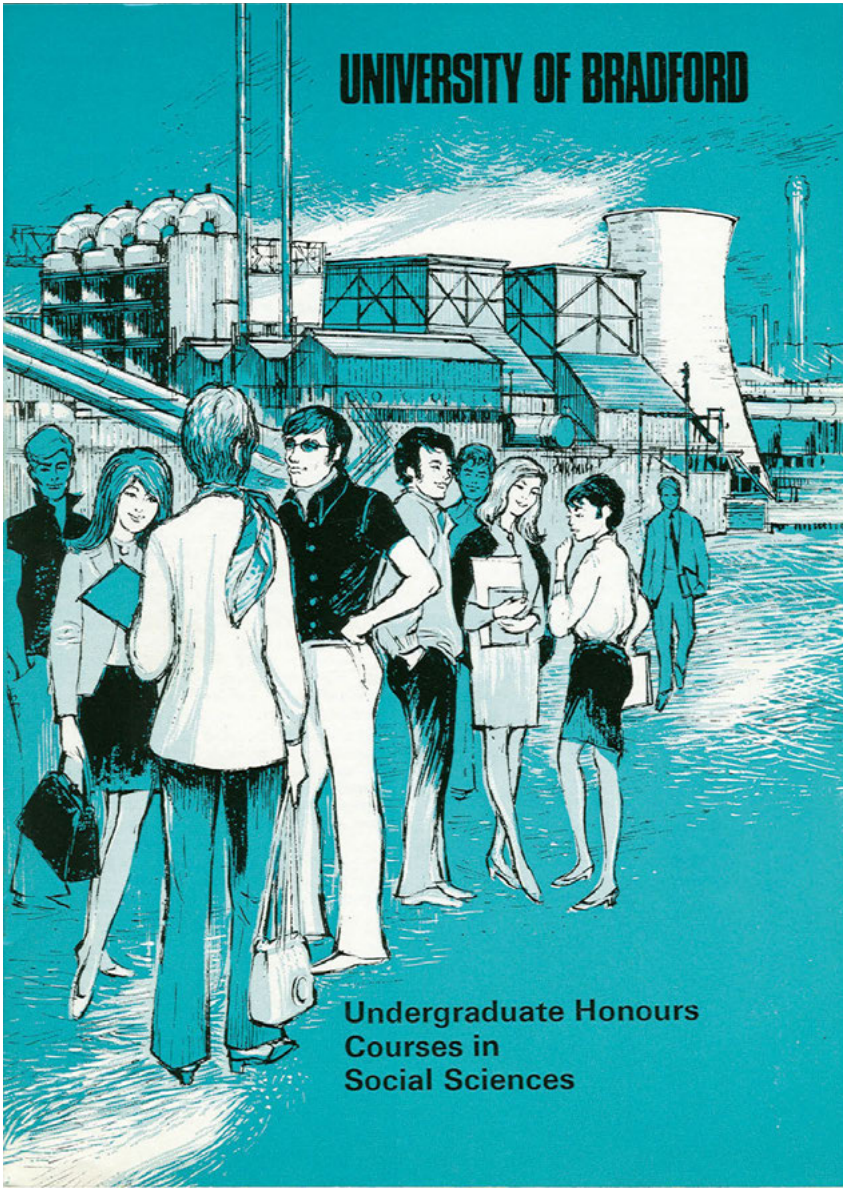
Official programme of the proceedings at the luncheon given by the President of the Chamber of Commerce, Henry Mitchell Esq., J.P., on the occasion of the opening of the Bradford Technical School by the Prince and Princess of Wales. 23 June 1882.

the skills of their workforce in order to compete. Hitherto the entrepreneurs had tended to guard their secrets jealously. The result of this concern was the founding of the Bradford Technical College in 1882. Alongside textiles, the College taught and researched sciences, technology, and management.

In 1957 the College was split. The higher education side became Bradford Institute of Technology (BIT). This was a College of Advanced Technology, a new kind of institution set up to improve technological skills in Britain. However, the "CATs" struggled without the funding and prestige associated with traditional universities and they were quickly granted this status. The city's century-long struggle for a university was ended in 1966 when BIT received its royal charter to become the University of Bradford.

As you might therefore expect, Special Collections holds the archives of Bradford Technical College and Bradford Institute of Technology, and the University's own large archive. Many other collections concern the city and its surrounding areas: a major collection of local books; 1200 maps and plans; the papers of local authors such as Willie Riley, who wrote heart-warming tales set in Yorkshire villages; family letters of Sir Isaac Holden, mill owner and politician, to name but a few. We work closely with our colleagues in the local record office and public library to make sure that local material goes to the most suitable home.

Our collections include a few early printed books, but most of our special material dates from the 19th century onwards. This makes sense when we look at the dates of our founding and the growth of the city, not to mention that the University has always concentrated on science, technology and social science with relatively little coverage of the humanities. Therefore we were never in a position to purchase medieval manuscripts, hand-press era books and other treasures, or receive them from benefactors. Our story is about exploring the value of non-traditional special collections – modern materials are special too!



University of Bradford Prospectus for Undergraduate Social Sciences, 1971. Prospectuses from this period of the University's history often had very striking illustrations. This one is a particular favourite.

Peace and politics

This is apparent when we examine the collections at Bradford best known to international scholars: those relating to peace and social change. From its earliest days the University aimed to make knowledge work for the common good: our Charter includes a unique clause to this effect. Bradford had always been a radical city, a centre of protests and social action. The rapid growth we mentioned above led to social problems: bad housing, extreme poverty, disease, child labour etc. There was already a strong Non-conformist tradition in the area, which emphasised self-help and moral duty to help others, often temperance. We therefore see many examples of social action in the city, from the Chartists to the Independent Labour Party to the first "school-feeding".

It was natural then that Quakers seeking to set up the first Chair in Peace Studies in a British university should approach Bradford. The University's Vice Chancellor (Ted Edwards) and his deputy (Robert McKinlay) were active campaigners for peace. They had already identified "The Bomb and the Hungry World" as the greatest threats facing humanity and were keen for the University to help solve these problems through research. The first Chair of Peace Studies, Adam Curle, joined the University in 1973 and the department thrives to this day.

The establishment of Peace Studies led to the arrival of Commonweal Collection, an independent library offering resources on nonviolent social change. Its founder, David Hoggett, was an activist and librarian who was paralysed following a fall. Commonweal grew out of his personal library, operated as a postal service by David and his friends and set up as a charitable trust. When he died in 1975, the Trustees decided to move Commonweal to Bradford.

Through a huge network of connections, Commonweal collected hundreds of archives of individuals and campaigns. These came to Special Collections in 2004 as we had the expertise and facilities to manage them. Commonweal's archives include many of our

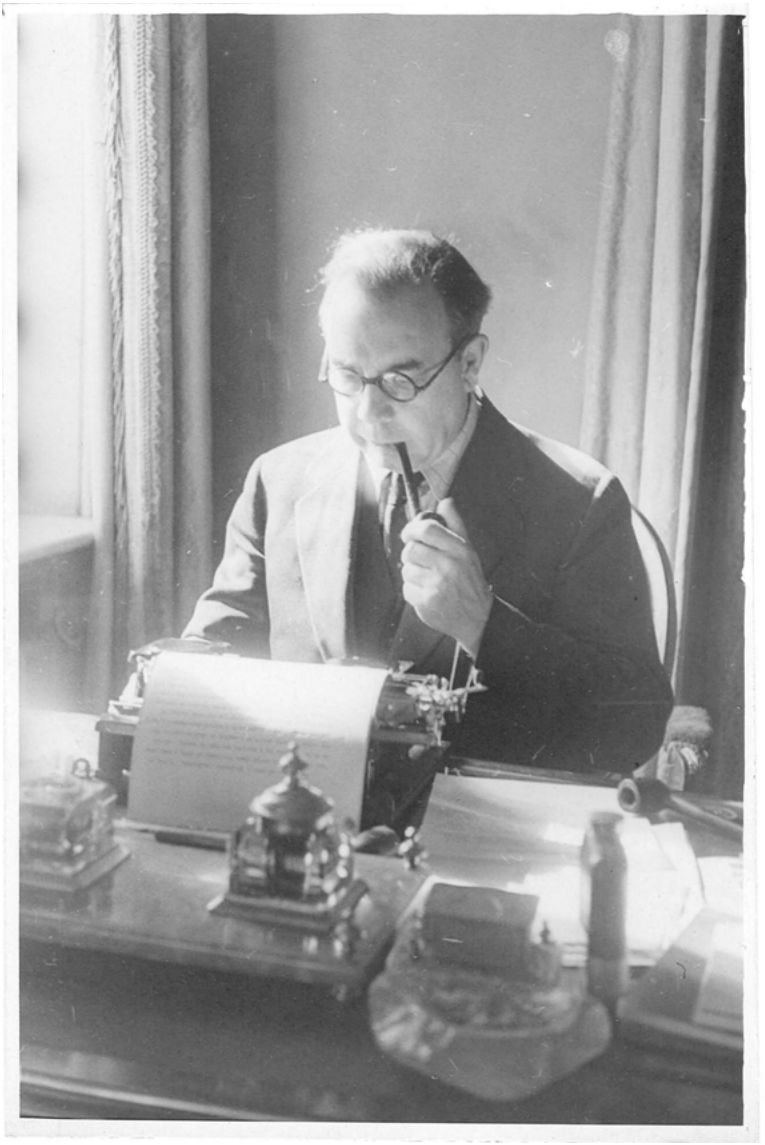
most important collections, notably the original drawings of the nuclear disarmament symbol or "peace sign", created by designer Gerald Holtom for the Direct Action Committee March to Aldermaston in 1958.

Jbp and Jacquetta

The subject of our most famous archive was himself a peace activist, born into the Bradford world of wool and nonconformity mentioned above. The author J.B. Priestley is perhaps best known for his 1945 play An Inspector Calls, which investigates the moral issue of collective responsibility for individual suffering.

"Jack" Priestley was born in Bradford in 1894. His father was an earnest socialist schoolmaster and his mother, who died young, a lively mill-girl. Priestley worked in a "wool office" as an inadequate clerk while aspiring to become a writer. He served in the British Army during the First World War, escaping the fate of all his friends, the Bradford Pals who died in the battle of the Somme in 1916. After the war, he moved to London to become a writer. His great success The Good Companions freed him financially to create plays, novels, essays, and memoirs. A hugely prolific author, Priestley was a household name, with strong political views which he was always ready to share. His other important works include his Second World War Postscripts broadcasts, the Time Plays, and English Journey, which is in part a protest at the sacrifice of lives to capitalism. Our Priestley archive reflects all this, including letters, scripts, photographs, objects, and the author's iconic tobacco pipes.

We also have the archive of Priestley's third wife, Jacquetta Hawkes, a Cambridge-educated archaeologist who turned to poetry and creative writing. Jacquetta is best known for A Land, in which she fused geology, history, poetry and personal experience to explore the story of Britain. Jacquetta's wonderful archive documents her personal life and career, including her work on the Festival of Britain, her friendships with other authors and archaeologists, and her interests in photography and nature. We have several other



J.B. Priestley at his typewriter, National Hotel, Moscow, 1945. Priestley visited the USSR for the first performances of his play An Inspector Calls.

archaeological archives, which cover the industrial archaeology of the Yorkshire Dales, the study of diseases in ancient bones, and the development of the Prehistoric Society from amateur enthusiasts to professional archaeologists.

This is just a glimpse of the richness of our collections at Bradford. As with all archive and rare book collections, there is always more to discover!

Discovering our collections

Special Collections are open to everyone, though we require our visitors to make an appointment so that we can guarantee access.

However, being open does not guarantee people will use our collections. We need to think about "discovery": exposing collections to people who may not know anything about our service. Relying on those who are experienced users going to our catalogue is not enough.

Like most similar services now, we can do very little cataloguing from our core staffing, so we don't wait until we have the resources to catalogue to the highest standard. We produce a basic box list as quickly as we can and put this online, so that potential users can find us and so that we can assess possible interest. Such interest is then useful evidence as we seek funding for more detailed work. We see cataloguing as a process of incremental improvement, in which basic work is enhanced as funding allows. This kind of approach has helped us tackle our "hidden collections" and make them accessible.

We have had great success in opening up our collections in this way. As well as academic researchers, the collections are used by undergraduates, independent scholars, writers, artists, publishers, theatres, family historians, University colleagues, enthusiasts of all kinds ... most people new to us have found us via online keyword searching.

To enable everyone to access collections regardless of their location or circumstances, we are working to make our collections

available in digital form. We have had great success via social media and we will soon be launching our digital library. This is an exciting development. We can only accommodate small numbers of physical visitors, but there is no limit to the access possible via digital methods.

We must also ensure that our own students are aware of the potential of the collections. Like all such services, we are increasingly becoming involved in teaching. We aim in particular to reach students who might consider using primary sources in their dissertations, to familiarise them with the reading room and our staff and to give them the confidence to explore further.

Big challenges

Our service has achieved a great deal since it was founded in 2000. In 2014, we were proud to become the first English university service to achieve the Archive Accreditation standard, which shows how far we have come.

However, like all such services in the UK, we face complex challenges. Firstly it goes without saying that our staffing, premises and funding are inadequate. We are still also struggling with the legacy of previous collecting. Years of appraisal, preservation and cataloguing lie ahead.

Meanwhile, demand for our services grows, and users expect more and more: faster responses, more digitisation, more support. We are operating in a turbulent environment: higher education and our organisations are in a state of constant disruptive change. Higher education is increasingly "marketised" and "managerialised", in a state of competition for students whose fees drive the sector: services and staff must justify their existence in often crude financial terms.

I believe services like ours must be innovative and creative to find ways round the immense challenges we face. The good news is that Special Collections can indeed find a niche in the competitive world of higher education. Collections offer institutions a unique

selling point, making them stand out from other organisations. In an increasingly digital world, the impact of the visual, tactile, beautiful, old or strange is increasingly powerful. High quality collections help universities to prosper, by attracting high quality researchers, students, and external funding, and gather media attention. We see increasing investment in special collections staff, premises and digital libraries by universities who understand this.

Unique and distinctive collections

The concept of unique and distinctive (UD) collections is proving helpful. Popularised by Research Libraries UK, unique and distinctive is replacing special in many contexts. Why?

The phrase explains why these collections are important, and what makes them "special". Unique is easy to understand: most archival material and many books are unique. I hope the above account gives some idea of what we mean by distinctive. This is material which fits our history, geography, values, purpose, mission, the material we are expected to have. It may be unique, or not. Individual items in a collection may be common but gain value/resonance from place in a collection. A copy of a plentiful book by J.B. Priestley becomes distinctive by its place in the library of his birthplace and its association with other books, archives and expertise relating to him.

UD helps us to move away from thinking about special collections in terms of age and financial value, neither of which necessarily justifies university investment in them. It also helps us to move out of the silos of "archives" or "rare books" so that we appreciate the full range of heritage material and can explain how it aligns with University mission.

The "Leeds typology"

So how do we apply this idea in practice? And what do we do with our existing collections which may or may not match up to this? I would suggest mapping collections at whatever level is practical

and then looking at them strategically. To do this at Bradford, we adopted a typology used by Leeds University Library for mapping their collections.

This method asks two questions:

- Are materials unique/distinctive e.g. archival, rare etc.?
- If so, how do they relate to our mission/policies?

The answers allow us to group our collections into four kinds of material.

1. Heritage clusters

Groups of UD material that connect with our story, have potential for range of uses and projects, appeal to various audiences, and justify investment in terms of our mission. Our current clusters are University, Peace, Local, Priestley, Hawkes and Archaeology. They include archives, books, pamphlets and maps.

2. Legacy collections

Unique collections which are self-contained, isolated and anomalous. They earn their keep (often small in size and catalogued long ago) but don't offer the possibilities of heritage material. We retain them but don't intend to invest in developing them at present.

3. Self-renewing

Useful material to help Special Collections users and/or staff and not to be kept permanently, such as directories and textbooks.

4. Finite

Not or no longer relevant. Not UD (old donations of textbooks, un-curated mainstream press cuttings) or else UD better suited to another organisation. If we can, we re-home or otherwise deaccession such material.

These ideas are the starting point for strategies, policies, plans and processes, to help us decide where to concentrate our efforts, not only collecting, but also deaccessioning, cataloguing, conservation etc. They help us solve a (rather nice) problem: that there are endless possible activities that we could do with our collections.

At Bradford, almost all our material is Heritage or Finite, which is possibly a weakness of this typology: I need to gather more detail from other organisations using this method to see if we can subdivide it further. Prioritising cataloguing and other activities within the Heritage involves looking at levels of demand and forthcoming activities such as anniversaries and conferences. We also aim to be fair to all Heritage stakeholders: for instance we aim to offer at least one "learning event" for each cluster each year.

The challenge of big digital

Digitisation, preservation, even born-digital can be managed at a small scale. How does a service like mine move its collecting into the digital age beyond the small-scale?

Our users imagine we are more advanced on this journey than we really are. "Have you scanned it all in yet?" is the most common question we are asked at events. So how do we bridge the gap between the public perception of what we have done, and what we most certainly yet have to do? How do we pay for it? What is the value of digital material? What of uniqueness and distinctiveness in a digital environment? I don't have the answers, but I work closely with organisations and groups who collectively are seeking ways forward, including the National Archives and Research Libraries UK. Big challenges call for big thinking and big collaborations – across borders too!

SCRIPTA MINORA

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